

Remarks delivered at AWP, Boston 2013, March 7, 2013

Fenton Johnson

The Art of Healing: Stories from both sides of the curtain

Panelists: Dr. Ron Grant, moderator; Dr. Danielle Ofri; Ms. Elisabeth Tova Bailey;

Fenton Johnson

Note: Suggested reading list attached at the end of these remarks.

I see I am called upon to address suffering and healing and the role of storytelling therein, so perhaps I should establish my credentials on this front, since I come before you not as a medical professional but as a witness, a recorder and teller of stories. On New Year's Day, 1979, I took up residence in San Francisco. I was twenty-five years old – was anyone ever so young? – and I arrived just in time to witness the last years of its great celebration of sexuality before the onslaught of AIDS. I lived there through the 1980s and into the 1990s, witnessing and participating in the deaths of many friends, among them the great love of my life. Of the many gay men I knew in San Francisco in the late 1970s, I know of two who are alive today; I am one of those two. In the course of those years I acted as sounding board for more than one friend as in ignorance and desperation he tried to discern how to end his life at a time and in surroundings of his choosing rather than lost to dementia in a hospital bed.

Every thoughtful medical professional of my acquaintance has told me that the practice of medicine is far more an art than a science. I believe this to be true, and so I will address you as fellow artists – and I include all of us in that term, because though

only a minority of us are medical professionals, sooner or later each of us will take our turn at being the medium through which healers practice their art.

Speaking to fellow artists, then, I cite Oscar Wilde, that expert on art, writing “from the depths” -- I’m quoting *De Profundis*, his letter to the world written in the second year of his term in Reading Gaol, when he was allowed one piece of paper a day, though not allowed to retain what he had written the day before. The letter thus becomes an act of single-pointed attention that perhaps only such gruesome conditions could enforce. As I read I invite you to make this substitution: where he uses the word “art,” think “medicine”; where he uses “artist,” think “healer.”

Clergymen and people who use phrases without wisdom sometimes talk of suffering as a mystery. It is really a revelation. One discerns things one never discerned before. One approaches the whole of history from a different standpoint. . . . I see now that sorrow, being the supreme emotion of which man is capable, is at once the type and test of all great art. What the artist is always looking for is the mode of existence in which soul and body are one and indivisible: in which the outward is expressive of the inward: in which form reveals. . . . sorrow is the ultimate type both in life and art. Behind joy and laughter there may be a temperament, coarse, hard and callous. But behind sorrow there is always sorrow. Pain, unlike pleasure, wears no mask. . . . There is not a single man in this wretched place who does not stand in symbolic relation to the very secret of life. Because the secret of life is suffering.”

If that strikes you as excessively grim, I quote Emily Dickinson, another, more local saint:

I like a look of agony /
Because I know it's true --
Men do not sham convulsion /
nor simulate a throe --

Now those are statements that fly in the face of just about everything we tell ourselves in Western advertising, movies, pop psychology, and medical care, where every face must be smiling, and happiness is our only legitimate emotion. But what these saints and healers tell us is true all the same. The secret of life is found in suffering. At the birth of a star or a child there is pain; at our deaths, if we are lucky enough to love and have been loved, there are tears.

Our culture and our healing arts are at an impasse, in a cul-de-sac because we seek pleasure without pain, life without death, eternal youth. The humanities in general, and storytelling in particular, add depth and roundness and meaning to our experience of healing and illness, life and death by providing each of us a skull, the figurative equivalent of the literal skull that Cezanne, like many other artists and thinkers, kept at the side of his palette. Did the presence of the skull mean that Cezanne knew no joy? Study his late paintings, in which he makes a religion of his art, in which he made a “religion of light” (the phrase is his), in which he captures all the joy of the landscape of

Provence on the canvas. On the contrary, the presence of the skull heightened and sharpened his sense of the totality of being, including joy *and* sorrow, wellness *and* suffering, life *and* death.

Medicine is where science intersects with art, healing with suffering, reason with intuition, certainty with faith. Cutting-edge physics increasingly teaches us that all matter is interconnected, that there really is no separation, at least not that physics can recognize, between you and me and the chairs on which we sit and the Western goldfinch who as I type is visiting my burbling fountain, between the living and the dead. We are all one in Christ Jesus, to quote St. Paul; there is no duality, to cite Zen Buddhism. The Vedas and the Tao and the Buddha and Jesus, to name four notable sources, have been telling us this several thousand years; perhaps the health care crisis will provide us one way to wake up and pay attention.

In his recent book *Training in Compassion*, my friend and teacher the Zen master Zoketsu Norman Fischer writes, “The practice of giving and receiving has two main purposes: first, to train your heart to do what it usually does not want to do: to go toward, rather than away from, what’s painful and difficult in your own life; and second, to realize that your own suffering and the suffering of others are not different. When you discover that this is so, you see that when you are willing to really embrace your own suffering, you find, within that suffering, the suffering of others; and the reverse is also true: when you are truly able to take in the suffering of another, you find within it your own human pain. Being willing to receive pain, we come to understand, is the only way to open our hearts to love.”

Why am I devoting my ten minutes to a subject that many would find lugubrious? Because to take up the practice of a healer or a writer – that is, to choose to be an artist -- is voluntarily to invite suffering into our lives. How foolish we must be! Yes, and how wise!

So you see the first and most important reason for reintegrating the humanities, whether through writing or music or the visual arts, into medical training and practice is the benefits that they bring both healer and patient. Being present to a patient's suffering makes the healer's job more challenging. It also enriches her or his own practice and life. And by keeping a journal, or maintaining correspondence, to trace the journey of an illness, the patient is laying down a path to finding meaning in suffering, which is one path to wisdom. Like life itself, the practice of any discipline rewards us precisely in kind with the labor, attention, and commitment that we invest.

I paraphrase an email I received from Beverly Lanzetta, who holds a doctorate in theology and is author of six books on contemporary spirituality. She wrote me that “in working with physicians, I want them to understand the importance of the humanities in medical training and in the lives and health of medical professionals, because it is in the depth and messiness and joy and sorrow of human expression that we glimpse the sacredness of the person. . . . one of the more striking aspects of sharing stories and writings that touch deep emotion, is the grief many physicians express over a loss of meaning, as the contemporary practice of medicine disconnects them from their own lives and those of their patients.” That same practice robs patients of our sense of meaning as well. Between healer and patient, these combined losses are sometimes as great or greater than the loss engendered by the illness itself. Our principal means of

addressing this malaise is, I submit, through the reintegration of the humanities in general and storytelling in particular into the practice of healing, because medicine is at its heart a narrative art.

Dr. Naomi Remen's book *Kitchen Table Wisdom* relates stories both from her years as sufferer – she has a particularly disabling form of Crohn's disease – and doctor, in which capacity she has founded an institute to counsel those with longterm chronic or terminal illnesses. She concludes her chapter on prayer by invoking a Native American chant: "Understanding the suffering is beyond me. Understanding the healing is, too. But in this moment, I am here. Use me."

###

Reading List follows.

Fenton Johnson

www.fentonjohnson.com

Following is a highly idiosyncratic reading list, drawn from poetry / fiction / creative nonfiction, of works that draw upon or present in some eloquent and telling way the healer/patient relationship. I welcome comments or suggestions for additions – email me at fenton@fentonjohnson.com.

Fiction / Creative Nonfiction / Poetry

Readings in illness / medical care / dying and death / loss and its lessons / wellness:

Mark Doty, HEAVEN'S COAST

Fenton Johnson, GEOGRAPHY OF THE HEART

Abraham Verghese, MY OWN COUNTRY

David Rabe, A QUESTION OF MERCY (play based on Dr. Richard Selzer's *New York Times Magazine* memoir of helping an AIDS patient take his life)

Alzheimer's:

John Bayley, ELEGY FOR IRIS

Alice Munro, "The Bear Went Over the Mountain" (short story made into the excellent film "Away from Here")

Depression/mental health

William Styron, DARKNESS VISIBLE

Andrew Solomon, THE NOONDAY DEMON (first chapter)

Mitch Albom, TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE

Abraham Verghese, THE TENNIS PARTNER, CUTTING FOR STONE

Charlotte Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper"

Doris Lessing, "To Room 19"

General:

William Carlos Williams (ed. Robert Coles), THE DOCTOR STORIES

Boris Pasternak, DR. ZHIVAGO

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, THE CANCER WARD

Leo Tolstoy, THE DEATH OF IVAN ILLICH

Simone De Beauvoir, A VERY EASY DEATH

Joan Didion, THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING

Rafael Campo's poems & memoir THE DESIRE TO HEAL

Audre Lorde, CANCER JOURNALS

Danielle Ofri, SINGULAR INTIMACIES: BECOMING A DOCTOR AT BELLEVUE

(and: The Bellevue Literary Review)
Frank Bidart, THE BOOK OF THE BODY (poem "Ellen West" for anorexia)
Susan Sontag, ILLNESS AS METAPHOR
Roland Barthes, CAMERA LUCIDA
Anne Fadiman, THE SPIRIT CATCHES YOU AND YOU FALL DOWN
W. Somerset Maugham, OF HUMAN BONDAGE
Zoketsu Norman Fischer, TRAINING IN COMPASSION
Victoria Sweet, GOD'S HOTEL

Classics:

The BIBLE, especially the books of Isaiah, Amos, Job, Esther, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Daniel in the Hebrew Bible and the three synoptical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) in the New Testament.
Marcus Aurelius, MEDITATIONS
Boethius, THE CONSOLATIONS OF PHILOSOPHY
Suzuki Roshi, ZEN MIND, BEGINNER'S MIND
Anne Fadiman, THE SPIRIT CATCHES YOU AND YOU FALL DOWN
Kathleen Norris, DAKOTA: A Spiritual Journey
Oscar Wilde, DE PROFUNDIS
Karen Armstrong, THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE
Anton Chekhov, COLLECTED STORIES; THE ISLAND (memoir of his journey to the prison camps of Sakhalin Island in the late 1800s)
Sinclair Lewis, ARROWSMITH
Carl Jung, MEMORIES, DREAMS, REFLECTIONS
Harriet Arnow, THE DOLLMAKER (opening chapter)
Gustave Flaubert, MADAME BOVARY
Katherine Anne Porter, "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"
Moliere, THE IMAGINARY INVALID
William Carlos Williams short story, "The Use of Force"
Boris Pasternak, DR. ZHIVAGO
Alexander Solzhenitsyn, THE CANCER WARD

Films: For those who have lost a child or a sibling: Jay Rosenblatt's *Phantom Limb*; for those working with a transgendered population, *Red Without Blue*